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John Lande

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John Lande
Isidor Loeb Professor Emeritus
Center for the Study of Dispute Resolution
University of Missouri School of Law
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You might assume that I always am a big fan of new technology considering all the pieces I have written about AI recently.

If so, you would be wrong.

This essay explains why I started using AI despite my tech-wariness – and why you might use it too.

Technology and Me

I often get extremely frustrated with modern technology, cursing and screaming when it doesn't do what I want.

I am a wary, tech-cautious, card-carrying member of the if-it-ain't-broke-don't-fix-it school of innovation. I rarely upgrade my devices and apps. I still use an iPhone 11 – can you believe it? Five-year-old technology! Most of my apps haven't been upgraded since the Obama administration.

To me, much of social media seems like a weird mash-up of cat-meme fluff, self-promotion, and a toxic flood of algorithm-reinforced deception, mockery, and hate.

I try to steer clear of Google and most things that may quietly be added to a digital dossier for profit, persuasion, or who knows what other purposes.

So why did someone like me dive headfirst into the world of AI?

Because it scratches some very real itches. Even for this curmudgeon, AI has an irresistible logic.

Until January 27, developing an AI tool for dispute resolution wasn't on my radar. That changed during a Zoom program where Susan Guthrie demonstrated how AI could be used in mediation. A brief conversation at the end of the program shifted from mediating disputes to improving writing – and that's when the light bulb went on.

I soon created the RPS Negotiation and Mediation Coach ("RPS Coach") tool, which is an outgrowth of the Real Practice Systems (RPS) Project. I originally planned

to develop a tool only for my writing, but I quickly realized that it had many other potential uses, especially to help people deal with disputes.

Coach is occasionally ornery, but it does *a lot* of things I find useful. It helps me develop ideas, draft material, and produce useful responses for people in many different roles.

It's not magic and it's not in charge. I am. I tell it what to do – sometimes repeatedly, sometimes with corrections – and I choose what to use or discard. It's not going rogue on my watch.

That's the key: I use it consciously and intentionally. I pick and choose. And I pay attention to the risks.

My use of AI reflects the same kind of intentionality that RPS Theory encourages. It calls on mediators and attorneys, parties, faculty, students – and actually everyone – to be conscious and intentional about their choices.

I decide when and how I use tech. For me, AI provides a ton of value and enough control to make it extremely worthwhile.

Technology and You

Some people want the newest gadget the second it drops. Others are digital holdouts, warily watching from the sidelines. Most of us live somewhere in between – enthusiastic users of some tools, skeptics of others.

We often normalize new tools real fast, sometimes before we even notice. Technology has repeatedly shifted from "cutting-edge" to "new normal" to "very old normal." We forget how novel, disruptive, and even scary innovations once seemed.

Think about the different ways we have communicated in writing. Pony express. Telegraph. Air mail. Fax. Email. FedEx. Texts. Social media. The cloud. Who knows what's next?

Almost certainly, AI will follow a similar path of innovation. Probably not all at once. Maybe not in the ways we imagine. Certainly not in the same way for everyone.

But it's coming – not just to tech bros and coders, but to educators, mediators, students, attorneys, and everyone who works with words, ideas, and decisions.

Getting Comfortable with AI

For some people, becoming comfortable using AI will be a slow, skeptical journey. And that's okay. Tech transitions don't happen all at once. They often happen when people poke around, experiment, and ask "what happens if I try this?" That's how most of us learn – slowly and sometimes by accident.

People have understandable reasons to be hesitant. They worry about steep learning curves, time constraints, constant changes in technology, privacy, errors, and/or ethical uses. They may feel that their own tech tools ain't broke.

The key to becoming comfortable using AI tools isn't just understanding what they can and can't do – it's also learning how to use them well. The results may depend less on the technology itself and more on the skill of the user.

There's a common misconception that AI is a one-shot tool – that you just type a question and blindly accept the first thing it gives you. Some people use it that way, but the results are hit-or-miss and may include mistakes. It also raises thorny issues about authorship.

The great value from using AI comes from thoughtful review, revision, and interaction.

AI doesn't always do what we ask, which is why we need to refine our prompts through a series of back-and-forth exchanges until we're satisfied. That's a skill we all can learn and keep improving over time.

I have used Coach every day for the past two months, and I figured out how to get really good responses and check for problems. Sometimes I point out a problem, Coach apologizes profusely, and then fixes it. Sometimes Coach just can't do what I need, even after several prompts, and I give up. That's ok. Most of the time, though, it does a fabulous job.

But just as people adapted to cordless phones and Zoom meetings, we'll adapt to AI – sometimes mindlessly, sometimes mindfully.

You may start by using AI to summarize long texts, brainstorm, or just find the best restaurant at your vacation destination. One thing leads to another, and all of a sudden, you're regularly using it to draft emails, make it part of your work, or even create your own AI tools.

As with other tech transitions, you may start by tentatively dipping your toe in the water and the next thing you know, you're doing a cannonball into the pool. Every day.

Technology and Us

Of course, we shouldn't embrace every shiny new thing. We should reflect on what's useful, fits with our values, and helps us work more productively.

The point is not to innovate just for its own sake. It's to use tools – old, new, and emerging – that help us and others make good decisions.

Even – really especially – when those tools talk back.